

They long to return to Colombia even as they describe the terror that forced them to seek safe haven in Ecuador.

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They spoke of the need for community development projects but have no one to turn to to help them help bring their modest ideas into reality. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, is nearly the lone partner with the Ecuadorian government in dealing with the largest refugee crisis in the hemisphere, with some aid from the World Food Programme and the IOM. Where are the other NGOs and U.N. agencies that would normally be involved in a crisis of this magnitude?

These crises are not of the making of the government of President Rafael Correa. Ecuador needs and deserves the support of the international community and Congress to address these challenges. They cannot be allowed to remain invisible.

Mr. Speaker, I was deeply moved by my visit to Ecuador, and I will never forget the courageous people, Ecuadorians and Colombians, who told me their stories and asked for my help. They deserve to live a much better life. In the weeks ahead, I hope I can count on my House colleagues to help these communities in this effort.

[From the Christian Science Monitor, June 24, 2008]

TACKLING ECUADOR'S REFUGEE BUILDUP

LAGO AGRIO, Ecuador.—Less than a month ago, Rosalba Agredo González was given only a few minutes to leave her house in Colombia. She was woken up in the middle of the night by armed men who threatened her and took away her neighbor.

"They told me they wouldn't do anything to me because of my children. Otherwise they would have killed me," she says.

Agredo now lives with her elderly father and her three children in Lago Agrio, a small city in northern Ecuador, 15 miles from the Colombian border. They've made their temporary home alongside one wall of a small wooden house, with only a tin roof, concrete floor, and plastic sheets for walls. She doesn't have a job but sometimes prepares a local pastry at a neighbor's house which her eldest son sells on the street. Despite her precarious situation, she is happy to be in Ecuador. "I don't want to go back to Colombia, even if I have to maintain myself by selling empanadas," she says. "I feel very happy here because even if I don't own anything I know my children are safe." Agredo's story is not uncommon. Ecuador has more refugees than any other Latin American country—a consequence of the longstanding conflict in Colombia, which has received little international attention. Five to 10 refugees arrive in Ecuador every day, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), mainly, from two southern Colombian provinces bordering Ecuador, Putumayo and Nariño. Given the buildup of refugees, the Ecuadorean government and a few humanitarian agencies are taking measures to provide asylum and assistance. But the challenges remain large. Of the estimated 180,000 who have entered Ecuador escaping violence, 16,500 have received a refugee visa and 22,000 are awaiting a response.

TROUBLE SECURING ASYLUM

The remaining 80 percent have yet to apply—some fear becoming vulnerable to

further persecution, while others are unaware they might qualify for asylum. Asylum seekers are granted access to public health and education from the moment they set foot in Ecuador. However they often have trouble affording decent housing and supporting their families, as they are not allowed to work until granted a refugee visa. "Legalizing refugees is very important so that they come out of their invisibility, otherwise they can't get legal jobs and become very vulnerable," says Alfonso Morales, who heads the department for refugees at Ecuador's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "They become easy prey to illegal networks and often end up participating in illegal activities." On June 20, to coincide with World Refugee Day, the Ecuadorean Ministry of Foreign Affairs inaugurated a new office in Lago Agrio, an important step toward improving refugee registration. The new office will make registration faster for applicants, as documents will be processed directly instead of being sent to Quito, Ecuador's capital. Another new measure is an enhanced registration process that will start in September and will make it possible for refugees to apply for and receive their visas in one day. Right now the registration process takes about four months if applicants can go to Quito and between 18 and 24 months if they can't leave the north.

ISOLATED, POOR COMMUNITIES

But registration is just an initial step in the process of providing better living conditions for refugees. The northern province of Sucumbios, of which Lago Agrio is the capital, faces the largest influx of refugees. A jungle area separated from Colombia by two rivers, the area also presents many logistical and security challenges for humanitarian work. Border communities here are difficult to access and often lack basic infrastructure such as roads, drinking water, and health facilities. Though Sucumbios is rich in oil, the province is among the least developed in Ecuador, with high levels of unemployment and an informal economy that relies on illegal activity such as drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, and human trafficking. It was in this province that Colombia's cross-border raid on March 1 took place, leaving FARC commander Raul Reyes—and another 25 people—dead and creating a regional diplomatic crisis. "In small communities the solidarity is amazing. They are willing to share everything, but it's important to intervene quickly so as not to allow tensions to develop," says Xavier Creach, head of the UNHCR field office in Lago Agrio. UNHCR has prioritized reaching those isolated communities along the border.

"We have serious economic and institutional limits when it comes to taking care of the huge quantity of Colombian refugees that have come to our country," says Mr. Morales, the government official. "The international community hasn't yet recognized the magnitude of the problem. We need foreign support."

[From UNHCR—The UN Refugee Agency, June 24, 2008]

ECUADOR OPENS FIRST REFUGEE OFFICE ALONG BORDER WITH COLOMBIA

LAGO AGRIO.—Ecuador's Directorate General for Refugees has just opened an office in the border province of Sucumbios, the first state-run facility of its kind to be established outside the national capital, Quito.

President Rafael Correa presided over the opening ceremony in the provincial capital of Lago Agrio last Friday, World Refugee Day. Lago Agrio is located just a few kilometres from northeast Ecuador's border with Colombia.

Foreign Minister Maria Isabel Salvador told guests that the office would help Ecu-

dor fulfill its obligations to refugees and others in need of international protection. Ecuador has the largest refugee population in Latin America, coming mostly from Colombia.

"This is in agreement with Ecuador's commitment to all human rights, a commitment that calls us to welcome any person forced to leave their home country in search of safety and a secure life," Salvador said, adding that the government hoped to soon open more refugee offices along the border.

The new refugee office will provide advice and orientation to registered refugees and other people of concern. Its staff will also conduct interviews to assess the applications of asylum seekers as well as issue documentation.

It will be fully operational as of next month, allowing the UN refugee agency to focus its activities on border monitoring and local integration of refugees, with projects that help both refugees and their host communities.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. WOLF) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. WOLF addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. LEE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Ms. LEE addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

BRIDGE LOAN FOR THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from Ohio (Ms. KAPTUR) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. KAPTUR. Mr. Speaker, it's a particular joy this evening to have Congressman NICK LAMPSON in the Chair as Speaker Pro Tem and thank him for his remarkable and exemplary service to the people of the United States.

Tonight, I would like to address the subject of the fact that a majority of House Members today voted for a bridge loan, a very tightly structured bridge loan, to throw a lifeline to American workers, American communities, American manufacturing, to save American jobs, in fact, one of every 10 jobs in our country. They're jobs not just in the so-called automotive assembly plants, but twice as many jobs in the automotive parts plants, the steel industry, the plastic industry, the semi-conductor industry, even the textile industry. Nearly half of that production is used in automotive products. It is simply staggering the way in which this integrated set of production occurs in our country.

What was passed was a bridge loan to the auto industry, and I underline the word "loan." It has to be paid back. It has to be paid back in 7 years, and it has to be paid back with interest, 5 percent interest over the first 5 years, and 9 percent interest over the last 2 years.